

Joe Biden in Memphis: 'A battle for the soul of America' is underway

[Katie Fretland](#), Memphis Commercial AppealPublished 8:57 p.m. CT
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National Civil Rights Museum 27th Freedom Award Night



(Photo: Ariel Cobbett, The Commercial Appeal)

A "battle for the soul" of the United States is taking place, former vice president and potential 2020 presidential candidate Joe Biden said

Wednesday night in Memphis, where he called for energy, leadership and a renewed commitment to civil rights and justice.

"Much of what you accomplished is under siege now like no time since I've been involved in public life ... We need to renew the struggle now," Biden said after accepting the Freedom Award from the National Civil Rights Museum. "We need to renew the fight."

Biden said hate and lost souls "who long stained our history" came to the deadly Unite the Right rally last year in Charlottesville, Virginia, where they chanted the "same anti-Semitic bile that was chanted in the streets of Nuremberg, Munich and throughout Germany."

"Did you ever think we'd see that again, Jess, in America? I didn't," he said to fellow honoree [Jesse Jackson](#).

Civil rights leader and Freedom Award winner Jesse Jackson talks to Commercial Appeal reporter Desiree Stennett on Oct. 16, 2018 about the "unfinished business of America." Desiree Stennett, The Commercial Appeal

"Forces we thought we had buried, fights we thought we had won, they're lashing back once again, testing our humanity, our decency with the same old tactics that represent one of the oldest, most insidious forces in America," Biden said.

Applause burst from the crowd of about 2,000 at Memphis' Orpheum Theatre as Biden said that "just as we were in Montgomery, Selma, Memphis and so many other times and places, we're once again living through literally a battle for the soul of this nation."

"That's literally what's at stake," he said. "Not Democrat, Republican. A battle for the soul of America."

Biden was tearful at the start of his speech after hearing a video narrated by his daughter featuring his accomplishments. He called the civil rights museum's Freedom Award the greatest honor he'd ever received.

He joined Jackson and Memphis philanthropist [Pitt Hyde](#) as the 2018 winners of the award. Among the past years' winners are Oprah Winfrey, former South African president Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama and former President Bill Clinton. Wednesday's ceremony featured a tribute to the Memphis-born Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, whose son and grandchildren were in attendance.

Victorie Franklin, the granddaughter of Aretha Franklin, speaks outside the Orpheum Theatre on Oct. 17, 2018 ahead of a special tribute to the Queen of Soul during the Freedom Award ceremony. Katie Fretland, USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee

The Freedom Award honorees spoke in Memphis two weeks after [President Donald Trump visited nearby Southaven](#) where he made national headlines for mocking a woman who accused Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault. In contrast, Biden introduced himself to the crowd as "Jill Biden's husband," Hyde made a special point of applauding the women who influenced his life and Jackson called attacking and mimicking women "darkness."

Biden also took aim at comments the president made after the deadly Charlottesville rally, when Trump placed blame on both the Unite the Right protesters and the counterprotesters and said there were also "very fine people on both sides."

Trump has "emboldened racists with a message of comfort and support," Biden said Wednesday.

"And our children are listening," Biden said. "And our silence is complicit. This is the moment. This is the moment to declare what he won't, that there's no place in America for hate groups. And we choose hope over hatred. We choose inclusion over fear."

In a booming voice, Biden concluded his speech by saying "don't tell me we have to accept where we are."

"Don't tell me that we can't restore hope in this country," he said. "Don't tell me that anything is beyond our capability. This is America. We've done it before, and it's time to do it again."